

VI. Rural Areas and Resource Lands

The purpose of the Buildable Lands Report is to analyze recent urban development and to determine whether King County and its cities have sufficient capacity within Urban Growth Areas (UGAs) to accommodate the county's forecasted population and job growth. In addition, RCW 36.70A.215 (2) requires some information about land uses and development outside the UGA. Such information can be useful in analysis of residential trends and to assist the county in directing its programs such as the Rural Economic Strategies to areas of greatest need. It is also helpful in analyzing linkages between urban and rural growth trends. The 2002 BLR included data on 5 years of residential permits in Rural areas. This 2007 report expands on that work to include a limited measurement of developable lots in Rural areas and Resource lands.

Rural Areas and Resource Lands in King County

The landscape of King County's Rural and Resource areas is characterized by extensive forests, small-scale farms, free-flowing streams, and a wide variety of residential housing mostly at very low densities. There is no growth target for rural or resource areas. Their role is as supplier of resources including timber and agricultural products, and their primary characteristics include:

- Rural areas cover approximately 290 square miles of King County (13% of the land area) including all of Vashon Island and a band of territory east of the contiguous UGA.
- Resource lands, including designated Forest and Agricultural Production Districts and Mineral Lands, cover about 1,380 square miles or nearly 65% of King County's total land area.
- The entire King County UGA, by contrast, covers 460 square miles, less than 22% of the county's land area.
- Together, the Rural- and Resource-designated areas cover more than three-fourths of the county's land area but contain only 140,000 people, less than 8% of the county's total population.
- The Countywide Planning Policies (CPPs) assume only a small fraction of King County's residential growth will occur in rural- and resource areas; staff projected about four percent of countywide growth for the 2001-2022 planning period.

Growth Trends Outside the UGA

A major goal of the King County Comprehensive Plan and the Countywide Planning Policies is to focus growth into the UGA. As Chapter V of this report demonstrates, King County's UGA does have sufficient capacity to accommodate its entire growth target based on OFM's 2002 population forecast. During the 1980s, prior to the adoption of the Growth Management Act, about 10% to 14% of each year's new residential units were built outside the UGA. Following adoption of the county Comprehensive Plan in 1994, the percent of growth in rural areas generally declined each year; since 2000, only about four percent of new units have been developed outside the UGA, as shown in Table 7.1 below. Together, these findings demonstrate that King County is succeeding in directing growth to, and accommodating growth within, the Urban Growth Areas.

Major Findings

The major findings regarding land uses and activities in the Rural areas and on Resource lands are as follows:

- The total number of existing housing units is approximately 51,800 (46,100 in Rural areas, 5,700 on Resource lands).
- Permitting of new residential units in Rural and Resource areas has declined to a steady average of about 500 houses per year since 2000.
- This small amount of growth is expected to continue, consistent with the assumption in the CPPs of a small fraction of residential growth occurring in rural areas and resource lands.
- Of approximately 63,000 total parcels in Rural and Resource areas, about 52,000 are developed with residential, commercial, public or open space use. Another 11,000 parcels are vacant or could be subdivided under existing county zoning regulations.
- Many parcels in Rural areas are smaller than the minimum lot size, because they were created long ago, before current zoning was in place.
- Approximately 14,300 additional housing units could be developed in Rural and Resource areas if all theoretically possible development occurred.
- The maximum number of housing units that could be built on vacant parcels is about 12,400, and there is potential for a maximum of 1,900 housing units on parcels that could be subdivided.
- At current rates of residential permitting, the rural area will still have undeveloped lots at the end of the planning period in 2022.

With regard to commercial and industrial uses, the major finding was as follows:

- Rural and Resource areas have approximately 215 vacant parcels zoned for commercial or industrial uses, covering 3,200 acres. More than half of those parcels are in the “M” (Mining) zone classification, covering about 2,500 acres. No data are available on commercial development potential or employment potential of the Rural and Resource areas at this time.

Methodology and Sources

The measurement of Rural and Resource land uses relies on the same data sources as the Urban capacity analysis, but uses a different approach that reflects the unique development pattern and different policy expectations in Rural areas. Land records and critical areas data are maintained at a finer level of detail in Urban areas; data on Rural and Resource lands are sometimes incomplete. While every attempt was made to produce the most accurate information possible, the precision of the Rural lot estimate reflects the limitations of the data sources available.

This measurement began with geographic information system (GIS) files from the King County Assessor’s land records. Data included Assessor real property and building files, zoning and UGA files from the Department of Development and Environmental Services (DDES), and critical areas files from the Department of Natural Resources and Parks (DNRP). Government-owned parcels (including US Forest Service), utilities and community open space parcels were removed. Critical areas were identified from DNRP slope and wetland files taken from the National Wetland Inventory, and appropriate buffers were applied. The analysis did not account for DDES’s authority to reduce critical area buffers in certain circumstances. However, the analysis did recognize that vacant parcels below the minimum lot size could be allowed one housing unit; on parcels more than twice

the minimum, the lot size factor was applied. Parcels with a housing unit were identified as subdividable if they were more than twice the minimum lot size. The maximum number of housing units was tallied for both vacant and subdividable parcels.

Table 7.1: Residential Permits in Rural and Resource Areas, 1996 – 2005

Year	Rural Areas	Resource Lands	Total Outside UGA	Percent of County
1996	878	37	915	8.0%
1997	886	33	919	7.6%
1998	829	38	867	6.1%
1999	705	25	730	5.0%
2000	549	29	578	3.9%
2001	476	37	513	4.3%
2002	453	20	473	4.1%
2003	451	30	481	4.2%
2004	484	43	527	4.6%
2005	412	31	443	3.5%

